



Natural Resources Conservation Service

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For additional information visit our Washington State NRI website at: <http://www.wa.nrcs.usda.gov/NRI>

## National Resources Inventory

*Resources of Washington Series*

### URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN WASHINGTON STATE 1982 - 1997 (Revised December 2000)

Washington is the most populous state in the Pacific Northwest. High-tech enterprises, manufacturing, forest products industries and the production of valuable agricultural products for export, are the base industries that provide for the State's high employment. Job opportunities are more abundant in Washington than in the surrounding states and the population continues to grow both from within the State and as people move to Washington. With over 5.6 million current residents and a forecasted doubling in 45 years, urban development will likely continue.

Urban development comes at the expense of all rural resource lands. Loss of production from our farms and forests may become a critical issue in the future. Other resources impacted include wildlife habitat, water quality and quantity, open space and outdoor recreation opportunities. To sustain urban growth, products are needed that are grown or mined such as lumber and rock products. As the rural land base shrinks these products and resources become less available. Land is also needed for the disposal of waste products created by society. Having less resource lands available means that the remaining lands must produce more.

Using the remaining lands more intensely while affording them environmental protection will continue to be a difficult balancing act.

Beginning in 1977, the National Resources Inventory (NRI) has been conducted every five years to record natural resource conditions in Washington. These periodic inventories provide a powerful trending database that is used to monitor both changes in land use and the health of non-federal land and water resources. The data on urban land development in this FACT Sheet was taken from the NRI.

In the period 1982 to 1992 Washington was the 17<sup>th</sup> most rapidly urbanizing state; during the 1992 to 1997 period Washington moved up to 15<sup>th</sup>. Washington had a 34% increase in urban land development in the period 1982 to 1997; 46% of this increase occurred between 1992 to 1997. Economic good fortune and expanded employment opportunities have led to increases in the building of houses, roads and commercial facilities. In the 10-year period between 1982 and 1992, rural lands were developed at the average rate of 28,700 acres per year. In the 5-year period between 1992 and 1997, rural lands were developed at the

average rate of 48,200 acres per year. This dramatic increase has impacted the rural community in many ways. The loss of farmland and forestland near both large and small cities has changed the face of Washington forever. Increased fragmentation of farmland and forestland has led to more rural landowners selling their property for development.

The most rapid urban development generally surrounds the Puget Sound of western Washington, however several counties in eastern Washington are also experiencing the same growth patterns. In western Washington, remaining farmland has become expensive to develop. Reasons include: more regulations regarding zoning, public health issues, floodplain management and other governmental policies to protect people and natural resources.

This urban growth has led to increased development on forestland; especially in the foothills of the Cascades. Virtually all of the low elevation forestland in western Washington is among the most productive in the world for softwood products and contributes greatly to the State's economy. Loss of forestland to roads, housing developments and shopping malls strains

forest products industries and many communities. Many of the acres of farmland being urbanized are among the most productive farmland acres available in Washington. These acres are generally level, well watered and have the highest fertility levels. New agricultural lands can be developed from pastureland or by clearing rangeland and forestland. Encroachment into these areas reduces these limited resources. New lands are generally steeper, less fertile, more erosive and more environmentally sensitive. These agricultural fields will require significant inputs of capital, labor, fossil fuels, fertilizers and other chemicals to become productive and sustain production over the long term. Irrigation water to produce crops may also be required. Water developments such as new wells, canals or reservoirs will need to be established where additional irrigation is needed.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is concerned about the environmental quality of rural land and water resources and is seeking solutions and cooperation with our conservation partners. This cooperative approach will ensure that efforts are directed to areas where positive changes can be accomplished.

## Increases in Developed Lands in Washington 1982 - 1997

